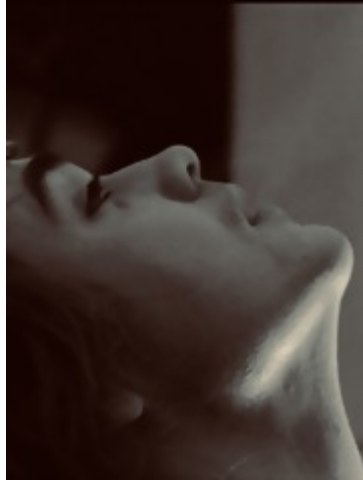




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Summary: When you aren't part of the Stranger Things crowd, stuff in Hawkins starts looking, well, strange. Who's the random kid who broke into Bradley's Big Buy? What happened to Benny, to Barb, to Bob, to O'Bannon? Why is Billy Hargrove fixing my house? How did Byers come back to life? Where is the Bible verse for all this? Why does everything start with B?

1. The Meeting

Yup, so we've got ourselves another Billy/OC. Honestly, what a lad. How could I not ship him with my OFC who lives in the creepy murder mansion on the edge of town?

This story is part character study, part writing practice, part 'I never write teenagers at high school and this could be fun'. Plus, you know, it's Stranger Things, so I get to play with telekinesis and the 80s. (Oh, and there are overtones of emotionally-unstable Nancy Drew.)

Originally, this was a personal fic, but I figured someone in the wide world might want to read it, so what the hey?

The first chapter is almost entirely Billy and my OC. If you can manage that, we'll get to the rest of the cast later.

Enjoy!

Chapter One

The Meeting

My investigation started with a question:

What happened to Benny?

From there . . . it kind of spiralled.

.

Already it's been a fatal venture. Riya was pushed off the bridge on Monday. They found Madeline in the pool this morning. Time is running out. I can only hope Miss Danielle gets this to you.

Hoping for Salvation

Bethany Norton

Whoever is doing this, they've been paying attention to the story.

Joseph lies under the bridge with his head caved in. Heaving, I smother my nose and mouth in the sleeve of my sweater and inhale the scent of budget laundry powder. I whisper a prayer under my breath and tell myself it's only a shell of flesh. It's impossible to believe because that's *Joe*. I remember him laughing in the seat behind me in Math last year. He had a nice laugh. Open, unguarded.

He is the first dead body I've seen. He will not be my last.

The letter from the principal's office indicates the pool next. The letter might be yellowed and burnt at the edges and written fifty-two years ago, but it's all I've got. Bethany Norton don't fail me now.

This bridge is a storey up, connecting the main building with the east wing of the school. It offers a view over the quadrangle and the black and white bricks of the Gothic revivalist buildings and . . . *there*. Part of the first floor of the west wing is missing windows and vents have been drilled into the concrete on the second floor. It'll either be the pool or the gym.

I run into the dark confines of the Hawkins College. It closed down in thirty-two due to a scandal involving a secret society. The girl in the letter was one of their victims. If I'm not fast enough, there will be two more.

I cross another bridge into the west wing, leaping over the ivy that crawls through broken windows and weaving around broken portraits. At last my flashlight finds a rusting spiral staircase. Down, down, down, into the dripping darkness. Fear claws at my throat.

This is no time to panic, I think. *Lives are at stake*.

The air in here is cloying and moist and the windows clogged with dirt. When the school closed down, the pool stagnated, growing algae. A breeding ground has erupted in the damp on the walls. The layer of mould and fungi is as thick as my finger. The whole place feels rotten.

Weed and muck turns the pool to gelatine. On it floats a body.

I send my horror to Heaven. *Why would you make me see this?*

The reply: *Where's Tyler?*

Flashlight on the letter.

It's a prison. They drag us from our beds as punishment. They make us clean the kitchens or the basement or the boiler room overnight. If we don't do it properly, we have to spend the next two nights in the attics.

Attics. That must be it.

A boy's shout confirms.

.

I'm halfway to the attics when I hear one set of running feet heading down. I freeze. It's them.

They keep running. Tyler keeps shouting.

Please, let the cops get them, I pray without confidence and head upwards once more.

I come to a long space with exposed black beams and cobwebs coating every corner. I have to pause and absorb. Slit windows shine between free-standing cages, stretching in two rows along the entire top floor of the building. This is where the students were kept as punishment. It's icy, far below the thirty-two degrees outside. All the warmth in the world is sucked up by the steel bars, the webs, the bloated wood. I can imagine the girls locked here in their school uniforms, heat leached from their fingers and toes as their bodies scabbled to keep hearts and lungs working. Breath misting. Tears freezing. Unable to speak a word for fear of further abuse.

Tyler hollers in a central cage.

I take a hairclip from my pocket and make quick work of the lock. The door screeches. Tyler quiets.

"It's me, Asher," I whisper.

Tyler Matheson looks as large as a bear in the small confines of the cage. A chain around a pipe on the far wall anchors him in place. I

duck down and yank the gag from his blue lips and he starts working his jaw. I start on the newer padlock at binding his wrists, flashlight held in my teeth.

"Strange?" he says. I grunt. "Strange, you've got to get me out of here."

The padlock swings free. Tyler lets me unwrap the chains, grimacing. His wrists have been rubbed raw. The ends of his fingers are purpling.

"Who did this?"

"Some guy. He was nuts, man. He kept going on about his grandfather." Tyler's eyes widen. "Joe. Mikey. Are they alright?"

I place a hand on his broad shoulder. He's colder than an icebox. "I'm sorry. Whoever he was, he got to them first."

Tyler stares, blue eyes welling up with tears. The terrors of the night pile on him before my eyes and he cracks under their weight. Sobs wrench themselves out of his chest and Hawkins High's centre lineman falls forward to bury his forehead in my shoulder. I hug him back. The muscles in his back shiver beneath my fingertips.

The horror hardens into anger. *Stop whoever did this, Lord, whatever it takes.*

.

"So, you think this was done by a violent group of nut-jobs who have been periodically resurfacing for the past five decades to attack students who go to the school. I get that right?" I nod. "All right. Explain."

Chief Hopper is an intimidating man at the best of times. At the moment, he's downright scary. "I started investigating HC at the end of semester as a local history article for school. I'm part of the newspaper team."

"I know who you are," he cuts in.

Right, that's not terrifying. "Yeah, so I did some digging and I discovered that lots of kids have been going there over the years and coming back with injuries. Thing was, everyone put it down to drunken accidents – you know, it's a place for parties and stuff. The whole haunted boarding school vibe. So, people write the injuries off. I wanted to get the whole story. I start talking to locals who went up when they were teenagers. Claudia Henderson –"

"–Ain't that Dustin Henderson's mother?"

"Yup. She remembered a friend of hers saying that a *man* had been the one to push her down the stairs. She hadn't slipped and she was adamant she wasn't drunk enough to mistake it. Mrs Henderson herself mentioned feeling like someone was watching her the whole time. I guessed it might be that society or something, protecting the school despite it being closed down. What other reason is there? I mean, stranger things have happened. Like the Hawkins lab leak."

"Indeed," he muses, his leather chair creaking as he plants his elbows on the desk. I've got his attention.

"I kept trying to get out there myself – it's not far from my house – but I had a job all summer and the start of school is always hectic. Then my mate tells me that Tyler and Michael and Joseph were going over for the weekend . . . I had to check it out."

"And you jump on a bike without informing anyone you're going, find two dead bodies, a boy locked in a cage, and your bike gets stolen by the perp. That about sum it up?"

"That'd be it."

Chief Hopper sighs and runs a hand over his balding head. My research says he's early forties. Tonight he is much older. Two dead boys on his watch, another horribly traumatised, and me.

"Flo!" he shouts. I twitch in alarm. He waves a calming hand while heaving himself out of the chair. "Wait here, I'll get one of the men to take your statement and drive you home."

"Is Tyler going to be okay?"

"We'll get him counselling. Matter of fact . . ." He scribbles a note on a random piece of paper and slaps it on the keys of his typewriter. "We'll get you one too."

"I'm fine."

That stare blatantly states 'you are an idiot child.' "You're running on adrenaline."

I roll my eyes. "I'll be *fine*."

"Counselling," he repeats, and he stomps out to find Flo, the station secretary.

Already I know there's no way I'm letting a counsellor poke around my head. God's good enough for me.

Now I'm alone at last, I lean forwards and peer at the papers scattered all over the desk. There are police reports, eye witness statements, the Hawkins Post article from the seventh that reran a *Chicago Sun-Times* story. In the article, Barbara Holland's pleasant face smiles next to the blocky Hawkins National Laboratory. Hawkins has been under a spotlight ever since that tape got released that damned the laboratory for unsafe practices. When I bike home there are news vans parked along Randolph Road. A chemical leak, they said.

"Yeah, right," I scoff. "Even though Barb lived on the other side of town."

Oh, now that's interesting. An adoption form? With Hopper's signature too. That's something to add to The Wall. The name of the adoptee is covered by a map. I reach across and –

"Powell will take your statement and he'll drive you home," Hopper declares. I shoot to my feet with an innocent smile fixed in place. Hopper frowns from the doorway, decides not to ask, and jerks his head for me to follow him into the precinct. Tyler waits on the row of plastic chairs opposite Flo's desk. He attempts a smile. Mrs Matheson, a lady half his size, clings to his hands.

"How're you feeling?" I pause to ask.

He shrugs. "I'll be okay."

I touch his shoulder in what I hope is a comforting manner. "Hang in there, tough guy."

Suddenly, he envelopes me in another hug that encircles my whole body. He's warm, finally, and no longer shaking.

"Thank you. Thank you, Asher Strange."

.

Officer Powell whistles. "I always thought this place was haunted."

"Just by me," I sigh.

"I don't envy you."

"I don't envy me either."

"Ever think about renovating?"

"I am slowly. It's tough going when there's only one of you. Let me know if you know of any free labour."

"Will do."

"Well, thanks for the lift."

"You sure you're gonna be all right?"

I slide out of the passenger seat. "I've been here seventeen years. Another night won't kill me."

"Hey." He leans over the gearstick. "Call if you got any problems. I'm on night shift." He glances at the house and shudders. "Hate to imagine you being alone here after the day you've had."

"Thanks, Officer Powell."

The soft-spoken Calvin Powell smiles. "Call me Cal."

"Will do."

He touches his hat and straightens up. I close the passenger door, moving closer to the house so he has room to turn on the gravel drive. The car heads along the prairie road, takes a left, and goes west. That way will take him into the forest, the barrier between the prairie and Hawkins. The other direction would take him to where Hawkins College hides in a separate cluster of trees.

When the car disappears from sight I feel free at last. Free for my shoulders to slump and a groan to escape my lips and all the adrenaline to fade away so I'm left exhausted and alone.

Fifteen miles west of Hawkins lies a prairie. It's calm out here, a mild thirty degrees. Crickets chirp, frogs croak in obscured streams, the dry tallgrass rattles. The vast sky is alive with stars. Dense clouds are especially bright and take centre stage in the absence of the moon. They bathe the landscape in silver and, far in the distance, the brilliant nightscape lands atop the rising hills of the horizon. Hawkins College fades to the back of my mind in the face of Roane County's display.

There is enough faith in me, even after today, to be impressed.

I remain outside, drinking it in, prolonging the inevitable. A little longer is fine. On the gravel drive, facing the tallgrass, I can almost trick myself into believing the house doesn't exist.

Then, a noise, a crash, breaks the peace. I frown and turn to the black Victorian mansion.

My heart leaps into high gear.

I hadn't seen it before because of the shadows.

Skulking on the porch is my bike. The one that was stolen.

He's here.

"No," I whisper. Cal's far into the forest and I have no mobile phone. Help is the landline inside.

No, no, no. This cannot be how this awful day ends.

Panic settles itself on my shoulders and I have to fight it off. Clear thinking and surprise are the only advantages I have. Losing it is not an option.

Part one: avoid the creaking steps.

I plant my bag in the gravel and slip off my heavy boots. Flip, it's cold. The wood of the steps is old and splinters stab through my tights, burrowing into the balls of my feet. Avoid the second board on the porch, it creaks the most. Fingertips on the iron knob smack in the centre of the door.

Deep breath.

The hinges are oiled and the heavy slab of oak swings. He's switched on the entrance hall chandelier. Small incandescent bulbs burn in the mess of dripping crystals. There is the sideboard. It holds a hideous heirloom vase and the old-style landline hanging on its hook.

A curse from upstairs. At his voice fear ratchets up to terror. I can barely breathe. The base of the staircase is only ten feet away. He could peer over the landing railing and see me.

No, no, no, God's got this. Calm down.

But God 'had' Joe and Michael too, and look at what happened to them.

You're saved. It's going to be okay.

I'm feeling less okay by the second.

As I pick up the phone, my eyes fix on the portrait hung at eyelevel. It's dark with age, depicting a middle-aged man with a prominent scowl and W.J. stitched into his lapel. W.J. Morell, HC's evil principal. Bethany's letter said he was the one who ordered the secret society to murder her friends. He also built this house.

An engine's roar echoes through the open door. Headlights race within the tallgrass and then they turn the gravel drive into a broken landscape of black and white shards. They're heading this way. It must be Cal to the rescue.

I relax in relief and it is my undoing.

Arms strangle me from behind.

My scream is cut off. I scratch, drawing blood, achieving nothing but to make him choke me tighter. The hands are emaciated and vicelike. Prickling darkness starts to swarm, a million tiny pixels flickering on and off at the edges of my vision. He drags me into the kitchen.

"Girls like you killed him," he breathes in my ear, hot and foul.

The car skids on the gravel, the engine cuts out, door slamming.
"TOD!"

That's not Cal.

He throws me onto the lino. I'm too weak to do any more than reach, uselessly, for the fire poker. Straddling me, he forces my wrists to the floor on either side of my head.

"Get off." The cry rattles in my throat and leaves my mouth as little more than a cough.

The skeletal man snarls, his teeth glinting in the dimness. Spit collects at the corners of his mouth in his laughter.

"You poisoned Grandpa's house. I will kill you and burn this place to the ground to purify it." His voice is sibilant, lisping. Insanity dwells in those jaundiced eyes.

"Get off!" I screech and drive a knee between his legs. He lets out a croak, falling sideways. For a brief moment, his face is illuminated. He's the spitting image of his grandfather, right down to the W.J. on his blazer.

A newcomer enters the kitchen to see me scrambling out from under W.J. Morell's mad grandson. "The hell?" he says, and then he jerks back because Morell is at him like a snake, hissing and spitting and going for the eyes.

The newcomer punches Morell across the face and Morell thumps against a cupboard. The newcomer hits again, again, again. At last

Morell collapses and sprawls, unconscious, on the floor.

"Thanks," I say. Ack, since when does speaking hurt?

The newcomer has a mullet, a leather jacket, a black wife beater, and appears nothing more than intrigued despite the fact that he just knocked out a total stranger. The chandelier casts him into sharp plains of black and gold and reveals a catholic medal shining on his chest. He hooks a thumb into a belt loop.

"Who the hell is that?" demands Billy Hargrove.

I groan, flopping to the floor, and start to cry.

This was not what I meant when I said 'whatever it takes'.

Note: So, this happened. Uh, well. Another one for the 'pairing no one reads in a small fandom' category. Ah, who cares. At least I enjoy it, right?

As soon as Billy stepped out of his Camaro, he became my favourite character. The rest of the season cemented this for me. Not because I think he's a good candidate as a boyfriend or anything, seriously, I'd probably avoid him like the plague if I met him in real life. But . . . the POTENTIAL. You can do so much with a character like him!

And Asher? The name I got from a person I did medical school with (before I quit, go figure) and the girl herself evolved in the writing process. I rather like her. As the story goes on, I feel very, very sorry for her. Poor girl. She doesn't deserve me as her author.

Have fun!

(BTW: I am Christian and I fully support counselling. GET HELP. Talking to people, Christian or not, is necessary. Whether you have God or not you definitely need someone to help work through the mess that our brains can become.)

Next Up: The Police are back, Billy Hargrove has issues, and Asher Strange needs help.

TOWRTA

2. To Serve and Protect

Back with another chapter to tantalise, to intrigue, to hopefully get you to keep reading. A person can dream.

Chapter Two

To Protect and Serve

"What you doin' here, Hargrove?" asks Hopper.

Billy's voice is easy. "Doing your job, Chief."

I hunch over, elbows on my knees, and clasp my hands. They won't stop shaking. Why won't they stop shaking? I want them to, I tell them to, I say *you are my hands you obey me* but still they shake. It's ridiculous. It's *my* nervous system, I should be able to control it as I want. Plus, I'm wearing my thickest coat and my hat and my gloves. I can't be cold.

Those traitorous shaking hands laugh at me, just as Morell laughed at me.

His hands at my throat.

His body heat seeping through my jeans.

I'm at his mercy.

Make it stop.

Morell taps me on the shoulder and I yelp, wrenching free, scrambling to the other side of the porch stairs.

"Whoa," says Jim Hopper. He remains in his crouch with hands raised in surrender. "You're okay."

That's right, I'm okay, I must be okay. Morell is handcuffed in the chief's truck and there's no one out here but Billy Hargrove and Cal and Chief Hopper. Nothing to worry about. Hahaha. *Billy Hargrove.*

"Sorry," I say. "Sorry, sorry, I just . . ." my hand goes to my throat. Can you pray away a bruise?

Hopper frowns. Billy's eyes are on me. He loiters on the threshold of the house, arms crossed, unmoved by the events of the night. He didn't say a word as I picked myself off the floor and stumbled to the phone. He simply dragged Morell to the porch, sat down, and smoked on the steps while I called the police. I ventured to thank him again and he grunted.

To be honest, he scares me more than Morell.

Hopper and Cal are talking by Cal's squad car.

"I don't like leaving her here," says Cal, his hushed voice all too audible in the prairie air.

"I have an idea." Hopper takes Cal around the back of the truck. Their words are muffled.

The night has lost its charm for me. The old fears of being alone come rushing back and they're not helped by the cigarette smoke in the air reminding me *who* stands not four feet away.

Hopper and Cal come back. Cal scowls. Hopper scowls too, but that's normal for him.

"Hargrove?" he says.

"What?"

"You're staying here tonight."

"Excuse me?"

"Huh?" I say.

Hopper shoves his hands in his pockets. "It'll be part of your community service. You get to help Strange renovate her house for the next month. It starts this weekend."

"*What?*" I gasp.

Billy is murderous. He takes one step forward and halts when Hopper holds out a hand.

"You might want to think first before you try anything," he says, easy as telling the time. "I am chief of police."

"I'm sorry, *sir*," Billy spits, "But I've got to take care of Max."

"I know for a fact that's not true because your sister is staying at the Wheelers' house. Try again."

"Chief," I cry, scrambling to my feet. Hopper lets me drag him by the elbow out of Billy's sight and around the side of the house. Here our company is the shed and the log pile and the sheer side of the towering house, its windows reflecting watery constellations.

Wringing gloved fingers, I say, "Is this the best idea?" I murmur. A whisper in the back of my mind urges me to shut up because gossiping is unchristian. I barrel on regardless. "Do you know why they moved to Hawkins?"

Hopper raises an eyebrow. "And you do, do you?"

"I work in the records room," I explain. "I know I shouldn't have, but I couldn't help it. We hardly ever get transfer students. He almost *killed* that boy, Chief. And we all saw what he did to Steve Harrington."

"What do you think the community service is for?" Hopper sighs and rests against the side of the house. The premature aging is back. "You read the rest of that file, Strange?" I nod. "Then you know about his old man?" I nod again, slower.

"The interview with Mr Hargrove's desk sergeant . . ."

. . . yeah, the boy . . . nah, kids need a thrashing sometimes, 'specially troublemaker like that. Though, I've seen him with some perps . . . I'd hate to be in that house on a bad day . . .

"Why didn't anything come of it?"

Hopper sighs. "Law enforcement out there is a mess and Neil Hargrove still has sway. I don't like bad cops and he was among the

worst. He's probably put that boy through Hell."

"Can you do anything?"

"I can't do a thing until someone speaks up and his old man's been good at keeping people quiet. If I can get him," Hopper jerks his head toward the porch, "away from that house for a while, it's not perfect, but it's something."

I get all that, and I even agree, but . . . "*Here?*"

He tips his head to the stars. "You can say no. I won't force you to do this." And then he catches my eye and the sincerity is breath-taking in his rugged face. "You're a good kid, Strange. I wouldn't ask if you couldn't handle it . . . He won't touch you, either, if that's what's worrying you. You're not his type."

"Oh, because that's real reassuring," I mutter. He's not wrong, though. There were reports of him being . . . popular, amongst the girls, but they were the ones known for shopping around. He left the rest of the girls alone.

And there was the interesting fact of his being universally hated by the male staff, and universally adored by the female.

God, I pray, if you want me to do this, give me a sign.

"Strange," says Hopper, in that gruff, reassuring voice of his, "you can call for backup anytime."

I heave a sigh. This is Hawkins' hard-boiled chief of police asking. What's that bible verse about respecting authority?

"Okay. Okay, let's do this."

The relief melts from his shoulders and he offers a fleeting smile. Billy Hargrove must have been weighing heavily on his mind. For the first time, I wonder at Jim Hopper's upbringing to make him care for the abused.

"How are we doing this community service thing?" I ask.

"He'll drive you home from school, spend the afternoon doing whatever job you have for him, and you call the station when he's done it. If he doesn't show, you let us know. If he pulls anything, you let us know. The deal was one hundred hours. Tomorrow will be his first day."

"But . . . hasn't it been like two weeks since he attacked Steve?"

"Things have been a bit busy. He's got to do two hours a day on weekdays."

"Weekends?"

"Do you want him here weekends?"

I lean back, peering up at the house. It's a monstrous shadow in a land made for farmhouses and weather vanes. Winter's around the corner and it'd be nice to have it painted to match the snow . . .

"I'll let you know."

Hopper holds out a hand. His huge palm swallows mine and I feel the restrained power in the grip. When it breaks, he pats me on the shoulder and says, "I owe you one, Strange." We head back to the porch. "You ever think of getting a guard dog for this place?" he asks suddenly.

"I'm out most of the day. It didn't seem fair."

Hopper nods. Billy comes into view. Hopper leans close and says, "Looks like you just got yourself one."

I grin uneasily.

.

This has been a weird night. That moron Tod gave him the wrong address on purpose and sent him out onto this creepy prairie with the creepy house and, inside, a creepy dude who tried to kill him.

Then there's this girl calling the police. She's dresses like Billy's mother from the fifties, except her hair is blonde, not brown, thank

God for that. Still, it's weird to see someone his own age in a shirtwaist dress and a flaring coat, buttoned tight to the waist, coupled with fur-lined ankle boots.

The only thing current about her is her hair – thick bangs and masses of blonde hair crushed under a beanie. It's tangled and unkempt. Billy's mother's hair was wispy and always held back in a braid that glowed in the sunlight. Glowed as she did. He remembers her singing in the kitchen while Neil was out and he remembers the way the golden beams haloed her flyaway tresses and he prefers that memory of her a hell of a lot more than the other one.

This girl, red-eyed from crying and shivering despite her gloves, is nothing like his mother. He sneered. High school girls. They were all the same and worse in Hawkins. At least in California they knew how to make themselves attractive.

The psycho jabbers at the support pole of the veranda, telling it that he will *kill all those bloody girls who dare defile Grandad's name, they did this, them, devil girls*, and it's aggravating as Hell. Billy thinks about hitting him again to shut him up.

A truck comes up the drive. He recognises it as the chief of police's, with a squad car skulking behind it. Billy stubs out his cigarette butt on the porch and gets to his feet. The girl comes out of the house.

"Finally," she whispers as she passes him. She takes care to make a wide berth around the psycho and meets Chief Hopper on the gravel.

Billy's walls harden. As if this day couldn't get any worse, the pigs show up. They're worse than high school girls.

Hopper sends the girl to sit on the step while he and another officer bundle the psycho into the back of the truck. That done, Hopper says to Billy, "What you doin' here, Hargrove?"

It's hard to forget that Hopper knows the whole deal of why Billy in Hawkins. His mom, his dad, that trouble with the punk at his old high school, all of it. It makes Billy feel vulnerable in a way *no one* is allowed to.

"Doing your job, Chief," he says, and he lights up another cigarette.

Hopper approaches the girl, who actually screams upon contact. That makes Billy raise an eyebrow.

"Sorry," she rambles, touching her throat. Billy rolls his eyes. Of course. She's the princess who lives in a bloody castle. Her mommy and daddy have never laid a hand on her in her life. It still catches him off guard when he remembers other kids haven't grown up with violence as common as dinner.

Pathetic, the lot of them. They don't understand real life.

"Hargrove?" Billy snaps out of the internal monologue. Hopper, the bearded wonder, is grave.

"What?" says Billy.

"You're staying here tonight."

"Excuse me?"

The girl's head snaps up.

Hopper shoves his hands in his pockets. "It'll be part of your community service. You get to help Strange renovate her house for the next month and you start tomorrow."

Of course the creepy murder mansion is owned by someone named Strange.

More importantly, where does Hopper get off? Community service is supposed to be painting fences for housewives who will invite him in for tea, not being stuck in the middle of nowhere.

Rage, an old friend, roars. Billy moves forward and forces himself to stop at Hopper's hand.

"You might want to think first before you try anything," Hopper warns. "I am chief of police."

"I'm sorry, *sir*," Billy spits, "But I've got to take care of Max."

"I know for a fact that's not true because your sister is staying at the Wheelers' house. Try again."

What sort of small town is this if the chief of police knows *that*?

Billy is cut off from retaliating by the girl, Strange, dragging Hopper away.

Officer Powell is staring, expression shrewd. "What're you looking at?" Billy snaps.

Powell shows his palms, saying, "Nothing."

Billy scoffs, "Right," and takes another drag. Hawkins is even more backwards than he imagined. They have a freakin' black cop. His father wouldn't stand for it.

The nicotine soothes a little of the rawness inside. What he needs is a drink and a drive, in that order.

Hopper and Strange's muffled conversation and the psycho rambling in the truck and Officer Powell crunching on the gravel all serve to piss off Billy even more. The second the pigs are gone, he's gonna find Tod and beat him to a pulp. No one gets to make a fool out of a Hargrove man.

They come back. Strange diverts to the truck, Powell joining her a second later. Hopper approaches Billy. Billy exercises the little-used muscle of self-restraint and orders himself to not punch the chief of police.

"Sir," Billy starts, putting as much disdain in the honorific as possible. Hopper cuts him off.

"This isn't a negotiation. You want to beat Steve Harrington to a pulp, you gotta take the consequences. We agreed on a month's service and this is it."

Punching him is not a good idea.

"Fine."

Hopper takes off his hat. "I don't know why you came here, Hargrove, but thank you. That girl would have died if it wasn't for you."

"Don't mention—

"—Shut up and listen," his voice hits a low note that makes Billy straighten despite himself. "You may not have noticed, but there's no one else here. Her parents split town when she was ten, and her brother two years later. Then today, after seeing two dead bodies and breaking a kid out of a cage, she was almost murdered in her own home.

"Now, I know you've got problems at home and I know your dad's a piece of work, but that girl over there cannot be alone tonight and you're all she's got. You're not my first choice, or my second, but you're here and that's what counts.

"So, you're gonna stay the night, you're gonna fix her house, and you're gonna deal with it like a man. You hear me?"

Billy, teeth grinding together, says, "Yes."

Hopper nods. "Good." Then he stomps off the porch, flicks a hand at Cal, pats Strange's shoulder, and the police clear out.

Strange is washed out and sickly in the yellow outside light. His Camaro, on the other hand, gleams silver under the stars. He could jump in and drive and say to hell with the consequences. No one tells him what to do.

Except then Strange trudges up the steps. "Have you eaten?" She doesn't wait for a reply. Massaging her forehead, she walks inside, calling, "There's leftover casserole. Bathroom's on the third floor, you can take the bedroom on the left. I'll get some fresh sheets," she keeps talking even as she disappears into the kitchen at the back of the house. "My name is Asher, by the way!" He tunes her out.

Two options present themselves:

1) Drive, find Tod, find a girl, find a drink, deal with the fallout of his father and Hopper

2) Eat casserole, sleep in a house from one of those B-list horror films, and get this community service sentence over and done with

One of these options will end in humiliation and pain. The other, food, sleep, and a few hours escape from his dad each day.

Billy goes inside.

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An hour later, he's conked out in Kato's old room and I'm in the mostly empty attic. I'm singing at church tomorrow, so I should be asleep. But, as usual on a Saturday night, I'm wide awake. One of the older ladies told me that the Devil tries to kneecap us before church, so we turn up to God's house feeling guilty and unfocused.

Staring up at the dusty noose hanging from the rafters, I am inclined to believe her.

Ten minutes pass, fifteen, twenty, in which I stare and feel grey and know I won't do it and wonder if I might someday.

The stories talk about a damsel in distress. They say she is beautiful and she is stuck in a tower and she sings to pass the time. The most introspective they get is 'she is lonely.'

Thing is, loneliness can be deadly. Stuck in a tower all day long, with no one to speak to but a crazy witch pretending to be her mother; surely that long drop to the brambles below starts looking attractive.

You aren't lonely, you have God. Get over it.

Hah, that argument got old years ago.

Now, a new thought.

Billy will come upstairs. Do you want him to see you like this?

No, I don't. Not that it matters, because what I want rarely happens. Actually, the bored self-destructive side of me would almost welcome his appearance. It might break through the wall of numbness that rebuilt itself during dinner. It's scary how thick that wall is. Despite

today being mad and almost dying, the memory of it is fading into background noise.

You saved a kid today! Be proud!

Motivational speeches don't work. In fact, they tend to make me angry and when the anger recedes the numbness is even more potent.

God, I know you're here, and I know you're with me, and I know Paul says to be content in every situation. I know you're what stops me from grabbing the stool and I thank you that you died for me but . . .

God, I'm drowning.

The attic has a skylight that is washed by the rain on the outside and by my hand on the inside. The sky is spectacular. For a brief moment, I am connected to it and I feel the universe expanding. God is more than my mind, more than my suffering, that he is in all things and everywhere and he sees me in my pain and . . .

Then it fades and I'm Asher Strange again, huddled on a cold floor under a cold sky, staring up at a noose. The guilt, right on time, comes crashing through.

I take care not to make a sound when I close my bedroom door. I slip under the covers, with the extra layers of blankets. They are a permanent fixture, lest I start shivering in the night and am not motivated to move.

Not that there's a point; I'm so cold I can't remember what warmth is.

Ash's POV was easier to get into (TBH, a lot of it is personal experience but, hey, write what you know right?). Billy is frickin' hard. I ended up writing a four-page stream of consciousness diatribe to understand the tiniest bit of his personality. It's a work in progress. Hopper is similarly hard. David Harbour is so nuanced on screen that translating that to paper is a nightmare. (That's what practice is for.)

Next up: Billy gets to know Ash a bit better, Billy takes out his rage with an axe, and Ash starts to question things.

TOWRTA